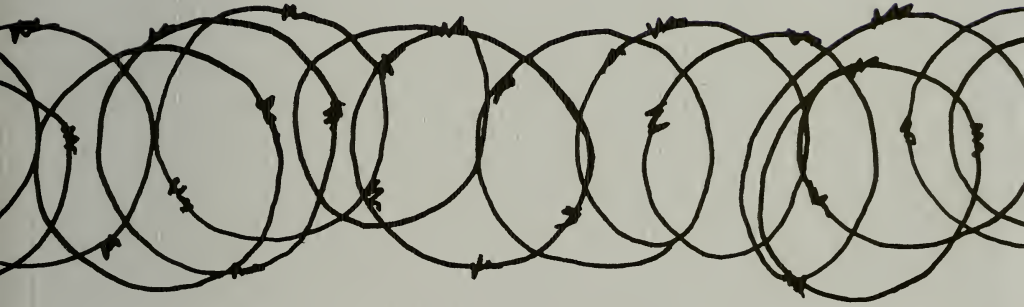


File: Student
Literary
Publication
(Archives)

i magazine



special vietnam issue

68

i magazine

'Nam issue

1988

i staff - vietnam special issue, 1988

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thanks to don knower
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i magazine is published by the division of humanities, mount
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The Wall

"In honor of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam War. The names of those who gave their lives and those who remain missing are inscribed in the order they were taken from us."

Those words are aptly inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in Washington, D.C., and they ring true..."they were taken from us." From the 58,132 fallen warriors whose names are etched into granite, to the thousands of still unaccounted for POW/MIA's in Southeast Asia, to the countless numbers within whom the war continues to rage..."they were taken from us."

Much has been said about Vietnam...but little about our boys who fought there, lost their hearts and souls there, and then returned home. What was locked out of our collective psyches so many years ago has now been jarred loose by a barrage of media explosions, and we are beginning to think and feel once again.

But in a sense, we have still not separated the war from those who fought it. Years ago, in our desire to express our frustrations with that conflict we targeted the young men who went there and did their duty. Having done that, it was easier to forget them than to confront their pain and their anger. The time has now come to face them, and to hear them, perhaps shed a tear for them, smile at them and know that the war is still with us in the grief we feel from our losses and in the lives of those warriors still struggling to come home. It is time to know their nightmares and continuing terrors and to recognize the inconsolable sadness which refuses to loose its grip on the hearts, minds, and souls of those who lost friends, comrades and soulmates to America's most unpopular war.

Our initial refusal to accept them back has got to bear part of the responsibility also for the nearly 100,000 returnees who took their own lives rather than face their country's disapproval and hostility.

There are still too many men with too much grief and too little dignity, but they must know from us that they are winners. Who else but they would have the strength and courage to survive what they have survived?

Scattered among these pages you will find thoughts and words from some of those Vietnam veterans who are still struggling, but eager to have you know that there is a deep yearning among them for your understanding.

Etched also on the black granite wall are the words, "Our nation honors the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty and country of its Vietnam veterans."

We need to remember those fallen warriors always...but in our remembering, let us not forget those who came home...many of whom are still encased in their own wall within. Perhaps as you leaf through these pages, you will come to understand them better, love them more, and forget them never...the lost, the fallen, the chained, and the free. And then perhaps we can finally embrace them and say, "Welcome home. Welcome home!"

Gerry Dech

The Best Years Of My Life

It's the music. Always the music that makes me remember. And, I hate remembering. I try so hard never to think about it. But listening to all the old sixties songs brings back the war years.

And I end up getting so angry. I think that's the reason I can't bear thinking about the whole damn thing.

I grew up in the Sixties. "The best years of your life," that's what my father used to say. It was the teen years for me. You know the dreams of real love, the dreams of the "happy ever after." Well, I found the sad realities of life hitting all of us when I was sixteen. It began with the horror of someone shooting our President.

It was the war that was the saddest of all. I had joined the USO about 1968. I loved it at first. I rode up and down the east coast: Ft. Hamilton, Ft. Monmouth, Ft. Bragg, Camp Lejeune, and I loved it. All those men, all the fun...I think I danced and laughed so much that I forgot there was a war.

I became involved more and more in these men's lives. I wrote letters when they left, waited to see them when they came home. It wasn't until one of them didn't come home that the war really hit me. I was shocked. I knew people died, but it seemed like only strangers died, not young men that were once a part of all my happy time.

Charlie was only nineteen. And it was a call from his father that brought me the news. I was confused, I didn't understand what 'friendly fire' meant. And, I was even more confused when it was explained to me. I mean, how do you kill someone you know? I went to the funeral home when his body came home. I walked in to find his mother leaning on top of the flag draped casket, trying to wrap her arms around it..."My baby, My baby," that's all she kept saying. I wanted to run away.

It was after, that I realized I had to do something, something that mattered. I became a volunteer at a V.A. hospital in New York. The music was always on, "Hey, Jude," "Aquarius," "Mrs. Robinson," ...and the smell of alcohol and disinfectant was heavy in the air. It doesn't matter where I am when I hear the music... it all comes back, it's real, again.

I was on the spinal column injury ward. I thought I'd really make these guys feel a lot better. Nothing in this world could do that, and that was the hardest thing to realize. It was a bitch in the beginning; they didn't need my sympathy, and I certainly didn't need their anger. But I went back day after day, until I began to understand their anger, and they understood my sympathy. It wasn't an easy time for me or for them. To see men with tubes of all kinds hooked up to every part of their body, totally dependent on others, some not able to speak, and all of them unable to move was....

Ed was a great guy. He was the newest one on the ward. His story was different than the others. He'd done three tours of Vietnam. He'd gone back to 'Nam even though he didn't have to, because he felt lucky. He felt that after having been there, and having returned safely, he could do

it again. Well, his luck ran out when he came home. He was mugged on a street his first night home by a couple of young, black kids who took his money, and called him "mother f___in' murderer." Then he woke up to the news that he had been shot in the back and that he would be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. He had a family, a fiancée, but he wouldn't see anyone. Somehow we formed a bond. Maybe because I never knew him before. He trusted me. He told me all his fears. He didn't want someone taking care of him. He wished he'd been blown apart in 'Nam. At least he would have been a hero. But this way he was nothing but a damn burden to everyone.

I cried with him. He truly trusted me, and I understood him. I understood how he felt. I helped him compose letters to his family explaining how he needed time alone. I helped him write letters to the girl who loved him. She wanted to see him so badly...he couldn't face her.

I remember the night I brought a bottle of booze to the hospital. It was against strictest orders, but, what else did he have? He had asked so many times, and I wouldn't do it... this time I did. A guy he knew had left a car unlocked in the parking lot; I had asked to take him out, and it was okayed. We were free. We sat in the car, talked 'till neither of us made any sense. Kissed and hugged, and cried till the bottle was empty. I managed to get Ed back in his wheelchair, push him into the elevator, and wave goodnight.

The next time I went in, because the elevator got stuck between floors, Ed had to be rescued. They found him on the floor of the elevator, passed out. The next time I was with him he was so happy. It didn't happen overnight, but, eventually, he began to realize he was still a person, capable of all the feelings he always had. For a while he felt like someone else. Like the body he was in wasn't his. He really seemed able to accept a little better the turn his life had taken. Soon after that he started talking about going home, and he did. Not all the guys were able to go home. Home became a bed in V.A.hospital.

The ward was full of young men I helped and became attached to. I think he was one of the luckiest ones. Many were paralyzed from the neck down. They couldn't move at all. These were the men I fed. Jeff was far away from his family, and I became pretty close to him. The men I fed were the men I got to really know. They could speak to me, and meal time became a real social event. Jeff loved mashed potatoes, and I'd feed him, and I'd sing "The Age of Aquarius" with him. But one day while he was eating and we were laughing, he suddenly froze...his eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth was frozen open and I didn't know what was happening. I still see that face so often. It scared me to death. A moment later it was over, and it seemed as though he didn't even know anything happened. It was some sort of a spasm. The nurse on duty explained that it was caused by all the damage to his nervous system. It was things like this that broke my heart. There were times I'd go outside to take a deep breath and cry. I never wanted them to

know how much the whole situation upset me. Some of the men I can't even talk about; I can remember, and I can see them in front of me. But to even try to tell someone that pain they felt, and the pain I felt for them, I still can't do it.

There were young men in beds who were slowly dying. Their bodies were simply withered and dying, and the only thing keeping them alive were the tubes attached to them. They had that blank look in their eyes, the look people get when they are defeated. There were no jokes to tell, no songs to sing...these are the men who broke my heart. I felt so much anger at the way things had ended for them. There were no dreams, there'd be no future. There was only the day...the day with the pain, the heartache. I still see these men, and I still cry.

I almost feel like the luckiest ones did die. They didn't have to fight a war, and come home and fight another one, like these men. It wasn't fair, and it still isn't fair. Why would God let them go through what they went through and send them home to live their lives this way?

And not all the men I knew ended up in hospitals. There were the ones who came home, and couldn't bear living with their pain. They were tortured by what they'd seen. Tortured by the pain they felt...pain they couldn't share. Remembering, and not wanting to. Unable to forget, and feeling guilty at times when they did.

There was Brad. Brad came home, but he never seemed to have peace of mind. He always seemed tortured by the past no matter how good things were. He just couldn't seem to be happy. There was his son, his friends, but it just wasn't enough. I remember having him and all the guys over one weekend. I made all their favorite foods, bought the beer, and they had a great time. The party lasted till everything was gone.... Brad asked me if I could lend him five bucks for gas to get home. I rode down the road with him, and he kept telling me how grateful he was that I was so good to all the guys. He really appreciated it, he said. He got out, put the gas in his car, paid the guy with the five bucks I gave him, and we rode back to my house. I got out, told him to get home safely, and he said, "Hey, thanks again for the money, I'll give it to you the next time I see you." When Brad got home that night he put a gun to his mouth and took his own life.

Since then two more of the men I knew have also taken their own lives.

Vietnam not only took our men, it took the hopes and dreams we all once had. The "best years of my life" were for me the loss of innocence.

Bernadette Manley

A Foggy Night

As quietly, as though planned
it travels
Perhaps too fast... sometimes
But if you wait...
and watch,
it will arrive.

Though they think of it...
we do it...
Behold...
or
beware, and be damned...
Allow us to grow...
ESPECIALLY OLD.

Scott Rhine

Friends

Life is a precious thing; it will be wonderful one day and try to break you the next; but we must go on, knowing that tomorrow will come. It may be better or worse, but at least it is another chance.

Let me tell you a story about a young man, a true story. It begins sixteen years ago in a place far, far away. He was young, twenty, knowing a long life lay ahead. He had no idea where this place was, only that it was in the news much of the time, but he paid little attention. The fighting, after all, was happening in another land, a continent and an ocean away. This all changed when Uncle Sam tapped him on the shoulder and said, "We need your help in this far away land." The young man went believing he would help; at best, he resolved that he would not stick his neck out. Self preservation was a natural instinct.

The foreign land was a place of nightmares touched a bit by a few pleasant dreams making it a little more bearable. He worked hard and, fortunately, did not have to go into the jungles. He was stationed on a small desert, twenty miles long and two miles wide, with a mountain on one side hiding the South China Sea, and, on the other side, a couple miles across the shimmering bay stood another mountain. The mountain was green and lush when he first arrived, but bare rock when he left a year later. It was a favorite target at night for the VC (Viet Cong). They shelled and rocketed it almost every night. The fireworks were spectacular. It seemed to be heaviest during the cease fire agreements. On many occasions a rocket or mortar would whistle over the compound, soaring towards the fuel tankers only a few miles away in port. Occasionally one or two would strike in the compound making a mess of life, limb, and buildings. It just ruined or ended, depending on your point of view, the day.

In time, after settling-in, he turned to booze and occasionally a bit of the other substances. After all, booze makes a man out of you, so television and the movies taught him. Drink helped sooth his nerves and guilty conscience. It is against human nature to destroy or damage another's body. Why do we have to do this insanity?

He made friends with the local people hired by the U.S. Military to do washing and cleaning and help in the kitchens. He learned a little of their language and customs and was surprised they spoke a little English they had learned from missionaries. The older folks spoke French they had learned during the many years France occupied the country. They combined the English, French and Vietnamese languages to form a new language which they used to speak to each other. It was called Broken English.

On Sundays the Base Chapel arranged field trips and picnics with the local Christian churches and Buddhist temple groups in the safe villages just outside the barb-wired and mined perimeter. He would sometimes volunteer to ride shot-gun on these trips. It was a relief mingling with families and people of all ages instead of only fellow American and

Korean and Australian GI's, and he was surprised to discover they were people like him with the same needs, feelings and dreams--they wanted to make a home for their families and enjoy life. Sometimes the fighting seemed far away and everyone could enjoy each other's company.

Sometimes they would explore and picnic on an old French fortification on the big emerald-green island in the middle of the bay. The fort was entirely underground and many of the tunnels' ceilings had collapsed, leaving some of the passages exposed. They all, but especially the children, had a fun time playing hide-and-seek and exploring the tunnels. Nearby, along the shore, stood the shell of what was once the Brothel. They were told the French always brought the ladies to keep up morale in this lonely place, "an old custom." Another favorite spot was a crystal clear lake thirty to forty feet deep at the base of the mountain hiding the sea. They, and some of the older children, would have a contest to see who could lay down on the bottom of the lake the longest. From there they could clearly see the swimmers and the raft on the surface far above. In the afternoon they all walked down a nearby dirt road running alongside the mountain to a beautiful cove, opening to the blue-green sea. It had a stretch of sand beach and, on two sides, walls of volcanic rock with ledges perfect for diving into the warm clear water. On the top of one wall grew perfect clusters of rock crystals, sparkling as the sun moved on its way behind the mountain above the cove to the horizon behind. It was a wonderful time. Like a day at the beach back home with good friends, all laughing, swimming, playing games and eating. At the end of the day they were tired but everyone left with their spirit refreshed and feeling that life was worth living again, and ready to face another day.

Ray Richard

"A Link In The Chain"

To Tom

There's a cool chill blowin' thru' the trees tonight, rippling 'cross the lone brook, and blowin' o'er my head and ticklin' thru' my beard. That breeze is my companion now; it has made friends with me and the trees and the brook. It's all I got left, but when it visits it knows it's welcome and I know it is free, like me. Or am I?

There's a babbling conversation from the brook tonight. It gurgles as it washes over the pebbles and sprinkles droplets on the mossy bank. It drones a tune as it spits across my mirrored face and I reach down to touch my mouth, my nose, my eyes.

My eyes stare-back at me and ask, "What manner of human chooses to befriend a brook, a tree, a breeze? Why not befriend another man, or lady, or child? Why does this human live in solitude to hunt and fish and forage... to chop, and saw and sit by fires... alone?"

The eyes in the brook answer quietly back, "You are a link in the chain... your woods are your society... they give you peace... they leave you peace... ask nothing in return. They're distant kin to the jungles of 'Nam which gave you birth, and raised you and taught you to survive and trust only brooks and trees... and breezes."

The brook gets angry now and then... so do the trees and the breezes... and so do I. I did my duty 12,000 miles away... and came home to face the anger of the people I did that duty for, and lost my buddies for, and lost my innocence for, and I soon grew angry myself. But my anger kept me alive then, it keeps me living still.

There's a loneliness creeping into my soul tonight. The smoky fire offers warmth... but no love; the breezes offer cooling air... but no love...; the trees offer shelter... but no love. My thoughts drift back sometimes to those I loved and lost in 'Nam. Maybe they're closer to home than I, 'cuz some of us came back... but never came home.

There's a cool chill blowin' thru' the trees tonight... reminding me that my wife is gone, my kids gone too... my family is now the trees, the brook, and the breeze. And I... I am just another link in nature's chain... a tired, lonely, worn, and weary link in the chain, but free..., or am I?

Gerry Dech

Shellshock

To W. Eugene Smith: Vietnam

Born to death.
No sight of the world
was a luck in its own.
Taken
by a war
 too soon
yet they are all
 too soon wars.
A soldier's
nightmare
babe in arms, still.
Comrade approaches,
and to hide the tears
is futile.
We are all men here,
we all will have tears.

Who cannot have fear
with a stolen past
shellshocked from foot
to mind?
Who should be
with babe in arms, still
and the tears of a soldier
on his face.

Tammy Armstrong

The Weekend

Matti Saari closed, and locked, the door in the Acute Psychiatric Ward, as he came onto his shift. Acute was where the Veterans Hospital kept the dangerous patients. Dangerous to themselves, or to others. He looked down the corridor, and listened for any disruptions. When he heard only calm tones, he felt better.

"Maybe it's a quiet night," he hoped, and unlocked the door to the Nurses Station. He saw the old and tired night nurse look up and smile.

"She's tough," Saari thought as the nurse just shot up, and prepared him with the daily reports. She was quick and efficient after being the Psychiatric Emergency Team Nurse for twenty nine years, long before they used Psycotropic drugs for straight jackets. After the briefing, Saari went out on the floor to make a head count and general inspection. He was a part of the Psychiatric Emergency team or P.E.T., and responded to violent psycotic and medical emergencies, throughout the hospital. As Saari walked into the dayroom, he saw nine of fifty patients in a ward built for thirty. It was an old building, designed for World War I veterans. He saw the last and final count of fifty, as a babbling twisted frame of a small middle aged man walked out of the bathroom. He had soft feces in his mouth, that ran down his face and shirt. Saari got clean pajamas and took him to the shower room. He filled the tub and began to wash the docile man, and heard a laugh from the patient showering in the open stall behind him. Ray Thomson stuck his head out with a grin.

"Got a ripe one, huh?" Thomson said.

Saari stood up and adjusted the surgical gloves on his hands. "Squash rot," Saari replied. He looked at Thomson and knew he didn't belong here. "Most of these patients were mentally ill before they went in the service, Ray," Saari said. "They only served a few months time, but were given one hundred percent disability. Hell, this guy has more money saved for him than you and I could save in a lifetime. All he wants to do is eat shit, and his family could care less. When he dies, they'll come for the money." He watched Thomson looking down at the old man. "I'll tag him and bag him," Saari said, still looking at Thomson. "When are they discharging you, Ray?"

"Ten o'clock in the morning," Thomson said, and looked up from the almost lifeless body in the tub.

"Where you gonna go?" Saari asked.

"Out of here, my man, out of here." Thomson replied.

Saari had just met Thomson four years ago, and knew that he had been juggled around the V.A. system for the last fifteen. He was now diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disassociation, with homicidal and suicidal ideation. Saari felt that Thomson was another stereotyped Vietnam veteran, and developed a friendship with him from a common comradery. Thomson could laugh with Saari, and when Saari worked

overnights, Thomson would wear his dogtags, so the nurses aid knew where he was. He would watch Saari making night bedchecks, silently leading his flashlight around wall lockers, while the patients slept. Almost every night, Saari would find someone hiding and waiting.

On the wooden dormitory door was a five year old sticker that read, "America is #1, thanks to our veterans." Its corners had been torn away, and the paper spotted. Saari could still read the inscription, as he made his final rounds before wake up. The ward janitor had been told to remove it, but he never did. He was told to do many things, but he hated his job, and performed poorly. The urine stains under the bed of the incontinent patients were always crusted, and though the aids wiped down the mattresses and changed the linen daily... the entire bay smelled of stale piss. There was a part-time kid who cleaned on weekends. He tried hard to catch up, but never could. Saari liked that kid. He had courage.

Saari heard the nursing supervisor opening the ward door, as he sat in the nursing station, filling out his treatment charts. The night nurse greeted the cheerful supervisor with a smile. He looked at the attractive woman, who ignored him, as he walked out on the floor. Later as the supervisor stepped from the nursing station, Saari casually walked over to her.

"I'll see you in two days, Sweet Cheeks," Saari said softly. "I've got the next four days in the woods."

"Shh," his supervisor said, seeing no one around, "someone might hear you."

Saari laughed and watched her turn red and girlish. "I'll meet you Saturday, Kathryn," he said with a smile.

The soft snow crunched gently under the feet of the man and woman, as they walked down a long trail to the cabin. It was nestled between a pine grove, spotted birches, and a frozen, wind blown lake. She squeezed his hand gently, and stopped to watch the woodsmoke rise and drift heavily through the trees, and disappear.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, almost breathless. "Now I know why you live like this."

"You know I could take advantage of you out here, Kathryn," Saari smiled, lifting an eyebrow. "You're all alone and helpless."

"I know you wouldn't, Matti," she laughed.

"Oh," he said, "you know that?"

"I know," she replied, "besides, I'd fire you."

"Aha!" He threw his head back. "You just drove over half this state, so no one would know you were here...and no one does."

She pushed him hard with both hands, and as he fell back, he pulled her down into the snowbank. They rolled and laughed together in the soft powder, and as they wedged against a pine, they stopped. He looked into her soft brown eyes, and kissed her.

"Let's go inside," Kathryn said.

"Jesus, Matt cried, as he slammed shut the wood stove door, and ducked

from the cloud of billowing smoke. He wiped the tears from his eyes, as he opened the damper, embarrassed that he had forgotten.

"Do your eyes burn, Matti?" Kathryn laughed. She was taking off her red down parka, and drapped it over an antique bench. She watched Matti, and wondered how she would break the news of Ray Thomson's suicide.

"Damn," he said rubbing his eyes, wincing. He walked over to the window overlooking the lake and pulled down the top sash. As he breathed in the air, he could taste the wind and snow on his lips.

"Lord Jesus," he smiled.

"Are you a Christian?" Kathryn asked kiddingly; she hesitated, then walked to his side.

"No," he answered, "I'm a Viking. From the fury of the North, deliver us, Oh Lord," he bellowed.

"A Viking in a kayak," she laughed, in anticipation.

"You said it," Matti said smiling. He looked into Kathryn's eyes and wondered why she was here? Why did she trust him, and why won't she leave her husband? He looked at her curiously, sensing something, and watched her face change.

"Thomson's dead," she said quickly, searching his face.

Matti stopped rubbing his eye. He felt a rage begin to grow inside himself, and pushed the window up with a crack.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"He shot himself last night behind building seven," she said, beginning to worry. "There was nothing we could do."

"Where did he get the gun," he questioned, turning toward her.

"His car was broken down, and still impounded. They think the gun was concealed, when they found the car broken into," she said, and held his arm.

"He must have lived on the grounds for two days," Saari said to himself. "I thought they were going to send him to the P.T.S.D. unit in North Hampton. Why didn't they?" Saari asked, trying to keep control.

"You know why, Matti," Kathryn said softly. "There aren't enough beds." He turned towards the window, and opened it, again. Kathryn shifted, still holding his arm.

"P.T.S.D." he said. "Bullshit!" he thought to himself.

"Do you know what happened to him, Kathryn," Matti said, turning, "when he was in-country?"

"You mean Vietnam?" Kathryn asked, dropping her hands as Matti pulled away.

"He went through hell with the Third Herd Marines," Matti said. "He was as tough as they come, Kathryn. He was shot once, then put back in the bush. The second time, he was riddled with shrapnel, and trapped under debris for a day and a half. The decapitated body of his friend was laying over him, and created an air passage. He described it to me one night, in detail. Hell, he was alive and half crazy when they dug him out...but he wasn't crazy. Even you thought he was just pushing for

more disability. Did you ever read his records?"

Kathryn started to become angry, then saw Matti's blue eyes turn ice grey. She felt guilty and broke away from his stare.

"You were in combat, weren't you, Matti?" Kathryn asked, looking back into his eyes.

Matti caught hold of himself and inhaled deeply.

"The Army, you know that," he said.

"You never told me..."

"Then you never asked," he cut her off.

She wanted to cry when she saw how deeply tired his eyes looked. She went to hug him, but stopped herself.

"You couldn't help him," she said, softly.

A cold wind broke through the window, and helped Saari fight off his anger. He instinctively reached for the pager that he wore on his belt at work. Only the Psychiatric Emergency Team wore these pagers. It gave him a feeling of competence. He remembered responding to a call for Admissions, and when he stepped off the elevator he saw Ray Thomson. Thomson was drunk and yelling at the young medical intern, who cautiously stood behind the half opened dutch door.

"Oh, Jesus," Saari thought, as Thomson turned and saw him.

"Hey Bro! What the hell is she doing to me?" Thomson shouted, as Saari approached.

"Do you know Mr. Thomson?" The intern asked, nervously.

"Yes, I do," Saari replied, calmly looking at Thomson. "How are you doing, Ray?" he smiled.

"I'm f___ed," Thomson spurted out, staggering, as Saari caught his arm.

"C'mon Ray, let's sit over here and have a smoke," Saari said.

Matti could smell the days that Thompson had been drinking, as he lit with his Zippo the cigarette that Ray pulled from behind his ear. As they walked toward the smoking area, Saari could hear the whine of the elevator. His partner jumped out, with two V.A. policemen.

"Dairy Queens," Saari thought, as he recognized the part-time weekend cops. He waved off his partner as he slid his Zippo into his pocket.

"Take it easy, Ray," Saari whispered, "You're pretty uptight, man. Sit here and I'll work it out with you, okay?"

"Assholes," Thomson said and turned.

"You've been through this before, Ray, and you know I won't bullshit you," Saari said. "I'll get you a clean bed, a few smokes...and something to eat if you want it. I'll take care of you, Ray. You know that."

"Yeah," Thomson said, as he sat down, and sank his head in his hands.

Saari put his hand on Ray's shoulder, and quietly felt his pain. His partner called for him, and Thomson looked up, and waved him on.

Saari knew the psychologist on duty was already called, and wondered why a medical intern was covering Admissions alone, without an aid, or a nurse.

"You seem to know him," the intern whispered. "How do I talk to

him?"

"You got a baseball bat?" The policeman laughed aloud, as his partner joined in.

Saari measured the officer, who was well over six foot tall, and stood cold and hard for moment.

"I have to interview him and give him a physical," the intern said concerned. "Will he be alright?"

"He'll be alright," Saari said. "I'll bring him over and stay by the door."

"He'll be okay?" she asked for reassurance.

"Yes," Saari said, as he looked at his partner, who smiled and shook his head.

Thompson put out his cigarette and did a slow strut through the treatment room door, that was closely flanked by V.A. police. Saari was infuriated, as he followed behind and motioned them off.

"Long time! Short time! Can do!" Thomson said, as he strutted back out, twenty minutes later.

"She grease your ass, Ray?" Saari chuckled, as he handed Thomson a cigarette.

As Thomson laughed and sat down, the elevator door opened, and the psychologist on duty popped out, and inspected the floor.

He was a short, stout man, and as he briskly walked to the office, Saari heard a muffled fart, and laughed quietly to himself. The O.D. signaled for the P.E.T. team, and as they walked over, Thomson rose, pulled his underwear from his crack, and stretched. He slowly strolled over to the rows of potted plants that adorned the Admissions perimeter. He stumbled, and leaned over the waist high, wooden encasement. The six foot five V.A. policeman saw him, and turned abruptly.

"Hey, Asshole!" he shouted. "Get back in the chair!"

Thomson stopped dead. Then one by one he began to rip out the plants in front of him and toss them over his shoulder in a fury. Saari dodged pots and spit dirt as he went through the officer who launched over the chair. He threw his arms around Thomson, and felt Ray's elbow jam into his ribs.

"It's me, Ray!" Saari yelled, as he struggled to pin Thomson's arms behind his back. He secured him over the encasement, and called for cuffs.

The officer fumbled with his belt, as the psychologist ran over, and pushed Thomson's face in the potting soil. Thomson wailed in muddy froth.

"Get off him!" Saari raged, and pushed the O.D. hard on his chest, when he heard the click of the cuffs.

Saari's partner grabbed Saari by the arm, while the psychologist held his chest, and said nothing.

The two nurses aids strapped Thomson to a bed, with four-point leather restraints, while two V.A. police struggled with his legs. The old ward nurse calmly injected the exposed buttocks with a hypodermic. Later,

after Saari cleaned Thomson, and changed him into V.A. issue pajamas, one limb at a time, Thomson awoke. Saari felt weak, and tired, and Thomson's eyes sucked out what strength he had left.

"I don't want to do this to you, Ray," Saari said, gently.

"I know you don't," Thomson mumbled, as his head drifted away.

"Sin Loi," Matti said, "I'm sorry." he thought to himself.

The soldier could smell the sticky blood, and dirty sweat, as he crawled over his dead friend. The steady popping of weapons were just a dull roar, as he pulled himself to the M-60 machine gun. When he pushed the body of the gunner away from his weapon, he watched the brains of the dead boy spew out from his head. He saw red and grey...and half of his own face.

Saari jumped from his bed and stood motionless and naked, as sweat dripped from his forehead, and ran down his chin.

"John?" Kathryn called to her husband. "Matti?" she asked opening her eyes to see him.

Saari reached for a cigarette and trembled.

"I quit, Kathryn," he said. "I've had enough".

Jeffrey Lakson

The Wall

As solid and hard
as the reality of
that war ...
even acid rain
cannot seep into
that poreless surface...
but a seed was dropped
by a gardener
as he leaned heavily
on that wall...
...years later
in the Spring,
roses fell from a
tender new vine
like tears.

Vietnam Combat Vet
Author Unknown

When My Tour Has Ended

The flight home was strange... and lonely... and I didn't want to come home. Yeah, I know, I just had left 130 degrees of stickin' heat, mortar fire, incoming shells all around me... but I didn't want to come home.

I didn't even know the guy sitting next to me, but he probably felt the same way; we were quiet... it was too tough to talk. I felt like shit 'cause I left my friends behind and I didn't know if they'd ever come back... like all my buddies that got it over there. Yeah, it was too f__in tough to talk... and I didn't want to come home.

Y'know, they told us that people were marching and parading and protesting... they told me they were spittin' on the guys comin' back. I just laughed. But when we landed I could hear those hippies and marchers outside and I wanted to kill 'em. Christ! My buddies were dead, back in that stinkin' country you people sent us to and you're gonna spit on me?... and I knew I didn't want to be home... and I knew I didn't want anyone to know Tommy was home.

I didn't want to get off the plane... I died inside... I felt messed up... I wanted to be back in 'Nam... but the voices said, "You gotta get off! You're home!"... But for me there was no home.

At nineteen and a half years old, I was back in the U.S.... alone... no one met me at the airport... no bands, no parades, no welcomes... except from the stewardesses and bartenders filling me with free booze. So I drank... for my buddies lost back in 'Nam.

Home was different... but so was I. They were all unsure of me... but so was I... and after taking my first walk downtown in my uniform and being spit on by an eighty year old lady... I went home, ripped off my uniform... and decided, "They think I'm mean, I'll be mean!"

You wanna know what my life has been like since 'Nam? Well... my tour never ended... I just stopped fightin' in 'Nam and found myself in a war in the good old U.S.A. It's crazy... you people don't like us... but who fought for you... who f__in' still fights for you when you need us? You call us outlaws. We tried our best and you see the worst! And who made us f__in' outlaws? Did you give us jobs? Did you thank us for going over there... and dying over there?

We wanted to work, to provide for our families... Me... I wanted to be a cop. They told me I was too short and too mean. Do you believe it? I came back with medals wanting to help and they said no again. So I became a biker... and Tommy became "Gorilla," and I did my own thing, and went into the woods... and I think. I think of the 100,000 guys who have killed themselves since the war 'cause they never did fit back into society... and I think. I don't trust nobody. It's too f__in' hard... it hurts my heart. I can't get close... the last time I got close to friends, they died... no more friends... until I see them in death. I think. I hate being the way I am, it pisses me off! I try to forget... I really do, but I can't! How can I forget so many? I can't! And I don't f__in' WANT to!

It hurts! Believe it! It hurts... and I'm still always close to war... not there, but here. Right here where the government has forgotten me; where I don't have enough money for an apartment; where my disability check isn't enough to buy me food, so I hunt and fish for it...; where the government gives more to the people who didn't go than to those who did!

Tell me, parents,... how do you feel watching your sons suffer? And how do you feel about your government that refuses to compensate them for their service and their suffering? How do you feel watching them sleep in alleys and dumps, with people calling them nothing but drunks?... and I think... all my scars aren't from the barbed wire in 'Nam... they're also from now... the present... and the pain... but some of my thoughts stay hidden, they live with me... and they'll die with me.

Oh yeah... death... I'm not afraid; 'cause I'll be with my buddies. I see them all the time, y'know; in the woods when I'm alone and cryin', they're there, and when I go to sleep they're smilin' at me and wavin' good night... and I'll see them again, when my number is up... and my tour has finally ended.

Tom Mallet, USMC

Road To Nowhere

Eighteen years of looking away,
watching my yesterdays piled in a grave....
Can't deal with today
'cause I'm still on patrol.
It takes most of my energy to
remain in control.
My hope quickly fades as
I wrestle my soul;
My tomorrows fall into a
gaping black hole.
Oh God! Ease this suffering
for it's taking it's toll.

E-4 Combat Engineer
Vietnam 70-71

Black Granite

Oh wall, oh wall, you stand
black granite against the sky.
Conceived in the mind, wrought by the hand,
a monument to boys who die.

Each name a life,
wrenched from a mother's breast,
given for a country seized by strife,
battered and torn without rest.

He's gone. I lost my friend.
Now you hold him to your side.
Will the pain never end?
Never! For we still send boys to die.

Peg Sullivan

Remembrances Of The Wall

It reminds me of a breakwater rising above the ocean...
with waves of people continuously undulating in an effort to touch and to
see and to feel.

Now and then the throng becomes steady and tranquil...
each person a droplet in the wave...and at once in pain and yet finally at
peace.

A young man's sobs catch the crowd's attention... yet he goes
undisturbed... alone with his pain, and his tears...
and his memories.

Strange, how though I am staring at that wall, it stares right back at me.
One solitary name catches my eye,
and I too feel encased inside the coolness of the granite. The tears
cannot penetrate its glossy surface, but the rough etching of each letter
in that name rubbing against my fingertips sends a message to my
soul... and it stays there...

"Do not forget me!"

Too many names... oh God,... too many names on that black granite slab rising from the earth like a Phoenix eager to free itself from bondage...

The wall... a tribute... yes... an overdue tribute to 58,132 men and women who lost their lives. No,... they did not give their lives, they lost their lives;

and the reasons are still unclear.

And therein lies the sadness in the tribute.

And therein lies the tears... too many tears,

but then... one name is too many...

and too many tears are NEVER enough.

And still they come... in hordes... 'neath the heat of a mid-April sun... prematurely hot. Fitting really... for the names on that gleaming wall represent 58,132 lives prematurely ended. The granite chevron seems to lie in state, creating a contrast to the new green grass and pink and white blossomed trees. Scampering squirrels and chirping robins play hide and seek... searching for each other on grassy knolls and thru' young saplings. A lone jogger in shorts and sneakers runs by, without a single break in stride, oblivious to the stream of seekers stretching and touching and reflecting on those 58,132 names. The scent of Spring blossoms mingles with the fragrance of a lone rose tucked into the seam dividing one panel from the next, and a welcome breeze brings sweet relief as shoulder rubs shoulder, and fingertips caress familiar names. And still they come... finally able to touch and feel the reality... and finality. But even in finality there comes a re-birth... and for many... the newness of a spring day can embrace the tears with a promise of a peace... tomorrow.

Gerry Dech

The Last Time I Saw You My Friend

The last time I saw you, my friend, you were dark and sad and filled with rage at a world which continues to war and suck life's blood from it's babes too young to protest.

The war was raging also within you... tell-tale signs like landmarks on your face; your body drenched with sweat and twitching fitfully as loathesome memories sliced and hacked through a warrior's dreams.

Peace nudges and prods and needles its way into your spirit but never quite settles in... for that would be far too easy. Faraway jungles and long-ago deaths and a plethora of wails and screams and bloodied "half-bodies" refuse to "loose" the grip which crushes your soul.

Has your raging war erased the life I once saw dance in your eyes? Will I never again hear that gentle man's laughter which urges my own to bubble up and erupt into fits of passionate hysteria?

The last time I saw you, my friend, your world was condensed into one solitary room where isolation and withdrawal were the only welcome guests. I felt a stranger there... no warm, gentle outstretched hand to draw me in; no soft, tender voice inviting me to enter your soul and share your nightmares and your secrets... they've now become too grotesque to share.

The last time I saw you my friend, your eyes no longer saw mine... you were much too distant in your faraway, long-ago world. Each day you draw further into your own private hell, and I, too, feel your pain and suffer your loneliness as strongly as I feel my loss. Death rears its head in many ways, but somehow the dying soul seems saddest.

Gerry Dech



> Kevin Decker 88 <

Vietnam Unmarried Widow

My eyes wandered through a room
where men and women sat,
and my eyes were blinded by a face
beneath a soldier's hat.

I hoped that he would come to me
and look into my eyes,
so that he'd know my love for him
before we said "goodbye."

Finally, when we were alone
and a lover's vow we made,
"I love you, and I'll wait for you,"
was all that I could say.

Your young, strong life was what you
had--all you had to give,
and now you've gone away from me
so someone else might live.

My eyes wander through a room
where men and women sat,
and my eyes are blinded by that face
beneath a soldier's hat.

There's nothing but a casket now,
a flag for all to see . . . ;
you kept your promise, Darling,
you did return to me.

There are no rings for us to give;
two candles take their place,
and instead of white--a veil of black
is covering up my face.

The minister reads a blessing,
we say our sad farewells,
and the beat of drums is all I hear,
instead of wedding bells.

Bernadette Manley

Popcorn In The Afternoon

"My favorite white ass."

The boy, who was trekking on Nordic touring skis, had climbed the path from the side of the mountain, and sliding into the camp site, did not hear the man. An hour ago, the boy had crossed the frozen river basin, and into the trees he had stopped to adjust the frame on his pack. The boy was carrying one hundred and five pounds of supplies. The weight was killing the boy.

Beyond the trees had been the real test. He had to climb the narrow valley, break through the hard-packed snow from the tree line, push and pull with each pole against the wind, until the gorge was behind him. The winds kept that region in ice throughout the winter.

Once the ice and the deep gorge were to the rear, the boy had faced a range of hills and the great mountain far to the north. The old logging trail led the boy away and it was then the boy had relaxed, knowing the worst was behind him. The camp site was in the canyon, protected by the tall trees, and the man who was waiting for the boy had a commanding view.

It was a cold February afternoon and the wind swept through the canyon, howling from the tips of the trees as lumps of snow fell everywhere. The man was sitting near the Primus stove, wearing a green Patagonia parka, shaking a tin container of popcorn over the flame.

"What's happening in the real world?" the man inquired.

"The morning news has you holding out in Chicago," the boy said with exhaustion, letting the rucksack pull him down backwards, into the snow.

"A long haul," the man said to the boy.

"Yes," the boy said. "Thank you for your support."

"Hey, Rambo, it's only the beginning."

"Do I have to do everything, myself?" the boy shouted, zipping open his over-whites.

"You got to get in shape, kid, before the Sandinistas shoot up your lily white ass," the man said, grinning.

"Talk about saving asses."

Earlier, two days ago, Hank Wynn had challenged the worst snow storm of the month. The northeaster caused havoc in the upper portion of the state, dropping four feet of snow. The winds raced off the slopes from the White Mountains, along the Presidential Range, leaving eight foot drifts. The boy had entered the wilderness park with the intention of surviving the bitter cold and skiing to the remote regions. He wanted to reach the old forest near the outer edge of the park and set up a shelter.

It was on the high ground the boy discovered the man, dangerously near death, buried in the snow. The wind had uncovered the man who looked like a black dinosaur frozen at the top of the world. Finding the

man still alive frightened the boy but it was the man's hand that encouraged the boy to approach. The hand was clenching a .45 automatic.

"I brought the batteries," Hank Wynn said, unzipping the upper section of the rucksack. He was good at playing soldier. Even though the boy was dead dog tired, he completed the task and handed the man the batteries.

"Thank you," the man said to the boy. The man placed the batteries in the radio and turned it on. The boy took a drink from the plastic canteen and looked at the frozen world.

"They should last until we reach our destination," the boy added.

"Communication is important," Jim said. "Are you hungry?"

"Great," the boy said, "popcorn."

"In a few minutes we'll eat like kings."

The pocket radio was unable to bring in any decent stations and even when Jim located one, the frequency modulation was weak. He would get no news or music today. It was the music that made the difference.

"Too much static," the man said.

"Dan Rather did a special on Vietnam Vets and the human time bomb syndrome."

"Shit," the man said. "Doesn't he have anything better to do?"

"You were the star of the show," the boy said.

"Time bomb syndrome. Shit, man," Jim said. "They have to f___ with everything. A name like that is a cheap shot."

"You don't talk much about 'Nam, do you?" the boy asked.

"Nope," the man told the boy. "Guys like Rather can make more dough at it."

"Yeah, but you were over there," the boy said. "What was 'Nam like?"

"Like bullshit, kid," the man said. "Be careful where you step. There was never enough of anything. Ammo came from a buddy who did not have a face anymore. When the shit hit the fan you prayed and hoped that it got over in a hurry. All the generals were tucked away safely in their villas, debating on the wine list. Are you with me?"

The program the boy was talking about had been scheduled with the CBS network during the month of February and when the story broke that Jim Master, an ex-Marine, who had spent two hundred and fifty one days in a Viet Cong prison camp, had murdered his wife and six year old son, Dan Rather took control. The special was aired for prime time and the camera crew did a terrific job, taping everything that moved for the viewing public. The small factory town in central Massachusetts, near the New Hampshire line, was broadcast throughout the homeland.

All the angles were discussed, leading from his tour of duty in Vietnam to the forgotten days as a POW in Cambodia that remain a Pentagon secret from the earlier days of the war. Several noteworthy doctors were interviewed on the psychological impact of being a Marine who was trained to kill. The now famous escape had been watered down by the war department, because Americans in bars, who were cheering for war

and peace, needed hope that we were winning the war. At no time was anyone given the truth. Hollywood could not have done better.

A correspondent told the public that not everything had been glorious for Jim Masters, who served time in the state prison system for possession of drugs since his return from the war. The hard luck of unemployment had contributed to PTSD, a severe form of mental health disassociation behavior. Dan Rather, the anchorman, came on and cracked a smile, condemning the great error left in our national consciousness that deserted these young men. The prison systems have become their home.

"There was a riot," the boy told the man, "outside the Parker Street Cafe."

"Could you see Nick Adams, anywhere?" Jim asked. And then said, "That's his home."

"No," the boy said. "I don't know any of your friends."

"He's a great guy," Jim said. "Always repeating some poet from New Hampshire. Something about west-running brook. You could learn a lot from a guy like that. You're right, kid, but you never will."

Hank was telling Jim how the town's people were outraged with the invasion of their privacy, and on television the riot had taken a more savage appeal. Especially when the patronage learned they were on camera, the riot really got out of control. They seemed to act up more. The police were summoned and the clubbing helped send eight patrons to the hospital.

Nobody cares, Jim thought. Nobody knows how to care. There is too much against caring. A kid is planted in front of television at an early age, learning to solve problems by killing the other guy. Before a kid reaches school he has witnessed over six thousand murders in his home. Someone, tell me, Jim said to himself, does anybody really care about our children? What is wrong in America?

"I think you're burning the popcorn," Hank told the man, who raised the tin container higher so that the bottom did not burn.

"Just the way I like it," Jim said.

"I don't," said the boy, "and we should conserve the fuel."

"There's plenty," the man said, not really caring.

"You put me in charge of supplies and I think we should go easy on the fuel."

"Hank, maybe you didn't hear me," the man told the boy. "There is plenty of fuel. Are you with me?"

The boy questioned that knowledge. He knew it was true. "How do you figure that?"

"Do you really think Dan Rather gives a f__ for the Vet?" Jim asked the boy, who had changed the subject because his headache was returning like a ghost from the past.

"My father says that Dan Rather is on the way out."

"I never liked him," Jim said. "He sounds too phoney."

"He hasn't been the same since the mugging."

"Peter Jennings was the one we watched," Jim said, realizing he had said the "we" word. He had not thought of his wife since early morning when he awoke from a bad dream, mixed and remixed with scenes of brutality in prison camp and home life. The blood spattered bedroom shocked him out of the dream, and he woke, screaming into the cold wind. The snow had packed against his face, inside the Gore-Tex down sleeping bag.

She was a woman who loved too much, Jim thought, and it made her crazy. He remembered all the arguments that took place in restaurants. There was distrust in her voice. Her insecurity was too much. And when the man she loved was not what she bargained for, it made her sick. Finally the sickness destroyed what real love was left. I love you, Jim thought. It's my fault. He had had to hide the war souvenirs.

"My father likes Tom Brokaw on NBC," the boy said.

"My father, my father," Jim shouted, as he stood up and stared at the boy with eyes that invited only the very brave or the very foolish. "You're a rich, spoiled little bastard who has a Rambo mentality. You're going to get your ass killed. Jesus, man, isn't there anybody out there who loves you enough? When I was your age I was climbing trees."

"If I don't do something, there won't be any trees."

"Christ, man," Jim said. "I've got enough on my mind to worry about. I don't need a wet assed kid. Are you with me?"

"We made a deal."

"F--- the deal," Jim said. "Are you with me?"

"Jim," the boy said. And then louder. "Damn it, Jim. You're burning the popcorn."

"Popcorn," Jim said. "Popcorn. I'm insane. Right. Just the way I like it."

"Are you all right?" the boy said, watching the man on the other side of the flame, hoping he had not made the wrong choice.

"Yeah. Let's eat this sucker."

The man and the boy sat there, eating popcorn. The trees prevented the full force of the wind from reaching them. A portion of the national clouds had settled over the canyon and large shadows were crossing the cold afternoon, blotching the sunlight on the mountain side. The forest was a safe place. The man looked at the moving shadows and he knew there was no place to go. The trees had been whispering his name since early morning. Jim had been talking to the trees. The trees, Jim thought, are my real brothers.

"You know, Jim," the boy said, "you must have one strong heart."

The man sat quietly and his eyes still had a rumor of death in them as he looked across the valley.

"When I found you," the boy said to the man, "you were nearly dead. Did you know that? For you to have stayed alive through the night, like that, Jim, your heart had to be stronger than a lion's."

The man was not listening to the boy and the fight was gone. There was always someone who wanted to change the world. The problem was

on his mind and the boy, who was the great celluloid romantic, needed to be rescued from harm's way. The wind swept across the still burning Primus stove. He had forgotten to turn it off.

"The fuel, the fuel," Jim said, mimicking some little fellow from television land.

"That's not funny," the boy said, hurrying to shut it down. "It's not your f__ing money."

"Right," Jim said, seizing on a surge of energy. "I'm only the guide that is going to save your lily white ass from here. Are you with me?"

"How, by building a raft and sliding down the mountain, or something?"

"No," Jim said to the boy. "There is only one thing left and I give that to you."

"Right. Here's a dime to call my father," the boy said. "You can't trust anyone."

"You see your father as a phoney, but phoneys can love too," Jim told the boy.

"I don't care," the boy said. "I made up my mind."

"Go back," Jim said. "There is still enough daylight."

"You're the phoney," the boy said, retaliating. "So far, the only thing you prove to be is a black, retarded sonofabitch who is biting the hand that feeds him."

"That's good," the man said to the boy who had tears running down his face.

The truth was not too far away, the man thought, as he looked at the trees who were the real survivors on the planet earth. The winter came with all its weapons, zapping everthing in the way, undermining the trees which with poor soil were not stubborn enough. No one can handle the truth. The giant vanity corporations control the truth. How do you tell a kid that it is alright for the war to be inside, Jim thought. As long as it stays inside, there is peace. The man had learned that from the trees.

"You've got a lot to learn, kid," Jim told the boy. "You win peace with peace, not war."

"Tell that to your wife and kid," Hank Wynn said, getting brave, but foolish. "Once a killer always a killer."

"You are one hard bastard," Jim said. "What makes you think I did it?"

"Dan Rather never lies," the boy said. "A deal is a deal. I learned that from my father."

"That was yesterday, kid," Jim said. "Actions are louder than words. And you ain't got it, kid."

"Look. Are we going to Honduras and help the Contras kill some communists, or what?" the boy demanded.

"I ain't leaving my brothers."

"You're nuts," the boy said. "Do you know that?"

"This is where I stay."

"Jim. You are sounding very wierd," the boy said.

"Thank you, Master Wynn," Jim said. "Your grumbling slave is ready to serve."

"This is your last chance," the boy said. "We still have time to hop the night train."

"No." Jim said. "No train tonight. They'll get us before we make the great Mississippi river."

"You're a nigger, Jim," the boy said. "A real nigger."

"You better turn away, now," was all Jim said.

The highway was empty at this time of night and the state trooper who was driving toward the park saw the boy walking on the other side. The trooper called to headquarters that the description of a missing white male, resembling the Wynn boy, had been spotted and that he was investigating. The vehicle flashed the roof lights as he swung around and headed in the opposite direction, stopping behind the boy who kept on walking.

The trooper observed the boy's face was frostbitten. There were blood stains splattered where fingers had marked the front of his over-whites. The boy had apparently urinated and the crotch area had frozen along the inner leg.

The boy whose name was Hank Wynn was in some kind of shock. The trooper escorted the boy to the hospital for further observation.

"I've got the Wynn kid," the trooper said, reporting to headquarters.

Joseph C. MelAnson

Hot Kisses

The noon break was hardly twenty minutes old when Lowbird, without speaking, gathered the squad for the Recon Patrol. I tilted the C-ration tin to my lips to get the last of the sweet, pear juice, quickly flattened the can and stuffed it back into the heavy rucksack. Still savoring the juice, I checked to see if my canteen was full, hefted the "sixty," and took my place in the short column. As the seven of us filed away from "Charlie" Company, I noticed the sweat already darkening the drab jungle fatigues, despite traveling without the cumbersome rucks.

In a month or two, monsoon rains would wash the clinging atmosphere into memory. On this quiet May afternoon, however, the heat was punishing and unrelenting. We moved slowly and deliberately, not so much to conserve energy, but to insure that our scuff-whitened boots and other gear didn't become entangled in the viney jungle vegetation. Quick movements attracted attention and made noise; a deadly combination in the bush of Vietnam.

Densely foliated, hilly terrain had gradually given way that morning to ground that was gentler and more open and for that we were grateful. The weight of the machine gun was more of a comfort than a burden as we tended to the business of patrolling with practiced ease. We were confident and our gait, though cautious, was that of young men comfortable in their element.

Bright shards of light filtered nearly green through the canopy of growth high overhead, created a dappled pattern on the walls of vegetation that was almost hypnotic to our scanning eyes. Our deliberate steps padded silently over the rotting jungle floor, kicking fetid odors up to alert, flared nostrils.

Lowbird, the platoon sergeant, was the old man at twenty-two. The others were just kids--eighteen or nineteen for the most part. Their youth, however, couldn't protect their sun darkened faces and wide eyes from acquiring the same hardness I had seen in photos of Dust Bowl farmers in the Thirties. John and Reb were from the same rural county in Tennessee. Sal, the Italian flower child, hailed from the concrete jungles of Philadelphia. Ranger, our radioman and grenadier, called Nebraska home. I believe the Indian was from the arid Southwest--Arizona or New Mexico. Lowbird and I were as New England as maple syrup.

Maybe it was the heat, or our full bellies, or even the general languor of the afternoon that contributed to our stunned surprise when the sound assailed us. A shriek, followed by girlish laughter, froze the Recon in mid-step as we tried to make sense of a sound that was alien to our world of gunmetal and grenades. We searched each other's eyes for confirmation. Yes! The others had heard it too!

Now, our straining ears picked up the buzz of excited male voices in addition to the high pitched giggle. We were patrolling in an area that had been cleared of all civilians so we knew that we had just made

contact with a V.C. or N.V.A. unit. And they had no idea we were in the neighborhood. Using hand signals, Lowbird quickly deployed two men to our flanks for security and motioned the rest of us toward the steady chatter of a strange language.

Preceded by the blackened snouts of automatic weapons, we crept forward, closer and closer . . . to what? How many were they? We were only seven and the rest of Charlie Company was three hundred meters of thick jungle away. Were they V.C., who were likely to cut and run after only a few minutes, or were they battle hardened N.V.A. willing to fight and die for their ground? Where exactly were they? We had a sound fix but the same thick foliage that kept visibility to five meters could also distort sound in the clinging afternoon heat. These and a hundred other questions thundered through our minds as we crawled closer on knotted bellies.

The next three minutes were burned into my memory in a series of slow motion images. Perceptions and senses were charged by the adrenaline surging through my veins. Lowbird moved us into a "hasty ambush" formation when he judged us to be about fifteen meters out. At the same time, the carefree and animated Vietnamese babble we had listened to for the past few minutes suddenly and ominously ceased. Had we been discovered? Had we been suckered into a trap?

The peace of that quiet May day was ripped by the ear-splitting explosion of Lowbird's first greande, closely followed by the din created by the squad's full firepower. Our posture was low and tightly bunched and this caused the deluge of hot brass shell casings to jump and dance wildly across our arms and faces. We paid it no mind in our fevered concentration. Two unbridled rebel yells somehow rose above the crescendo to strike terror into the hearts of our unseen enemy. Soon we were all giving full throated vent to our fear and battle lust, for now we were receiving return fire.

Time was suspended. Each second seemed to take minutes to chisel the micro-details into memory: Trembling hands that couldn't seem to move fast enough . . . The heavy gun bucking and spitting hot kisses . . . The pungent smells of hot gun oil and burnt cordite . . . And the noise, the incredible fury of sound that closed about us as if we were wearing it.

Suddenly, it was over. Heartbeats pounding in deafened ears, eyes burning with the sweat and grime of battle, we tended to our wounded while we waited for Charlie company to catch up. As our blood chemistry slowly returned to normal and parched throats were relieved with tepid water, we pieced together what had happened. Our recon had managed to sneak up on a ten or twelve man N.V.A. guard element in a small resupply and aid bunker complex. There had been at least one woman, probably a nurse, and we had been able to achieve surprise because they were engaged in some sort of celebration: there were partially filled jugs of rice wine scattered about. They had fought hard, but briefly, and then melted into the jungle with their casualties.

This skirmish was not my first firefight nor was it to be my last. It

was, however, the single most influential action of my Vietnam experience. In the middle of the fight I had caught a flash of movement through a break in the vegetation. Without thinking, as I had been trained to do, I swung the barrel of the machine gun to meet the threat. It was the girl. In the fraction of a heartbeat before my finger caressed the trigger, my eyes locked onto hers: I saw fear, then defiance and, finally, acceptance. I know today that all my grief and pain from Vietnam are for those eyes. It was the most intimate thing I've ever done.

Sgt. Gerald Maker
Co. C. 1/7 Cav.
1st Cav. Div.

Tywhong =Hi
From Chuck, Vietnam Vet, Cav, Combat Vet

The truth is...

None of us likes to be afraid...
most like to go to bed feeling safe;
but there are some that going to bed means only
to be awakened by something that never leaves
from the past.
Some never hang in long enough to see if it will
finally go away....
People say time will tell....
For a lot of us,
Time is...
Horror and Hell.

Chuck, Combat Vet

One Fine Day

I remember watching him cast out his line, sidearming it within six inches of a weedbed, with the finesse of a big league pitcher. Uncle Al was the "somebody" in my youth, who no child should be without. It seemed he always had the time to spend with a pesky eleven year old kid, when everyone else was too busy being busy.

Camping and fishing were his forte, of which he freely gave to me his skills. Who knows? Maybe everyone was too busy for him too. Over a few short years, the bond between us was as strong as any held by blood. Different maybe, but every bit as strong.

We were sitting on the north bank of the pond; not the best fishing, to be sure, but where the sun bathed us, on a just-getting-warm-day in early May. Both of us were using floats that day, for it was entirely too beautiful to be bothered with serious fishing. Uncle Al had his Grain Belt beer and I was being weened on an ice cold Pepsi. And my, the world was just grand that afternoon. Imagine the world, spinning 'round and 'round on end, and flying across the sun, while time stood still on that fair day in May.

"I'll be leaving Monday," Uncle Al commented so matter of fact like, "for about a year."

"Yeah," I said all courageous and scared, "why?"

"It's expected of me," he spoke into his beer as he lifted it slowly.

"You'll show those Vietnamese a thing or two, huh?" I said, not really knowing much, other than the nice name for people to be killed.

"Oh, I'm not so sure. They've been fighting someone for two thousand years or so. Me? I've only had a little make-believe training." It was all he had to say as he traded a dead beer for a fresh troop.

In my infinite childhood wisdom, that statement only reinforced my belief that those Vietnamese must be quite stupid. Imagine carrying on for thousands of years like that! I just knew my Uncle Al would set 'em on their ear most ricky-tick.

Anyway, he's been gone a long time now. Because nineteen years ago, the powers that were too busy being busy decided there were things to be done, that didn't include taking eleven year old boys fishing.

And me?

I just go fishing.

And wait.

Jeff Kramer

But You Are Free

As the giant ship gently touches down,
Camouflaged fatigues swirl all around.
Some must wait,
While others step to ground.

With one good leg sound,
On G.I. crutches, one turned around.
Thanked the stewardess who helped him down,
Content and joyful, now homeward bound.

Along a fence a crowd he sees.
People chanting, and screaming in jubilee.
"It's a welcome home for you and me!"
And he moves forward in his reverie.

Viet Cong flags are in their hand.
They're jumping and yelling,
With inflamed eyes,
"Killers," they shout.

Throw garbage.
Troops try to move, and are hit instead.
Some cry out when face bleeds red,
While people chant, "We wish you dead."

Troops turn away, and run in haste,
While wiping filth from the face.
On some, their medals all displaced.
To return to this, each felt disgrace.

A soldier's crutch points to the sky,
While others there hold fists up high.
They fought back hard, to question why.
With violent voice you're their cry.

"Is this the song, The Freedom Bell,
That you ring for those who fell?
Their honored cause you to quell,
For fighting in that land of hell."

"And you honor those who ran away.
For your freedom they did not pay.
You'll rue this act, come what may,
For what you've done to us today."

"Speak no more of war to us.

Away from you we all shall flee,
To a darkened place no one can see;
To suffer there this atrocity."

"You were right," one yelled to Lee.

"You're better dead than this to see.
Your life's been wasted for their liberty.
Now we die, and they are free."

Bernard F. Doran Jr.
S.F.C. U.S. Army, Retired

Twenty Years

It has been twenty years
filled with fears;
always looking over
my shoulder
in fear of an enemy
soldier.

At last I've been
labeled,
it's PTSD and unstable.
But I still pray
to live another day,
and to hold my head high
until the day I die.
So let's all pray
and be proud we're from
the U.S. of A.

Pfc. Ken McDonough USMC
69-70, 7th Eng. Btl.
C-Co., 1st Marine Div.
Vietnam

A Nation Served... A Stolen Youth

What difference you say, between this war and that one?
A war is a war, be it Verdun or Saigon.
And why can't these men bring their lives to fruition?
Because, after all... it's the human condition
to suffer and agonize, grieve, and despair;
All men have to die some in order to care
about being and breathing and mankind and life;
All men have to weather destruction and strife.

Remember the BIG war, the war to end all wars?
The war to bring peace and to open up all doors
to justice and unity, friendship, accord...
The war that brought honor, acclaim, and awards?
Remember that twenty-six was the "mean" age
of the brave "men" who left home to pen a new page
for their nation... and came home as heroes revered,
while the "boys" home from 'Nam were derided and jeered?

Do you recollect summer days in your teens...
Of biking and 'burgers and torn, ragged jeans?
And do you recall holding hands in the park;
Or of stealing a kiss walking home in the dark?
How 'bout the excitement of entering college
with bright expectations of garnering knowledge?
Remember the "flower child," the fierce social yearnings,
The anti-war protests and wild draft card burnings?
The 'Nam "boy" of nineteen was not yet man
when he honored the call to go off to a land
wracked with bitter discordance and enemy unseen...,
And he changed overnight from a young lad so green
to a hard grunt whose conscience was always instilling
the virtues of honor amidst all the killing.

The war was not fought just in jungles or valleys;
It wasn't just battled in dark Saigon alleys.
It wasn't just seen in the heart and the head
of the "boy" from Toledo, the "lad" from L.A.;
in the shrapnel-fed "youth" with his legs blown away.

Yet still barely twenty... 'twas time to go home"
from a war never won, just to find he's disowned.
Body spent, spirit crushed... still... expecting elation
He arrived home alone to an ungrateful nation.

He carries it still, all the guilt and rejection;
The pain and the suffering, the heartache dejection.
The young man whose boyhood had not yet been finished
still struggles with memories whose pain won't diminish.
He yearns with a heart and soul still nineteen
for a youth lost to war and regained self-esteem.

So ask THEM the difference 'tween this war 'n that...
They'll march in their 'cammies and BDU hats,
and beg you remember your youth and much more...
'cause while you were maturing...
They went to war!

Gerry Dech

The Day

That day was supposed to be beautiful. It was. The weather was, anyway. The sun was shining. The sky was blue. The water was warm, warm by Maine standards.

We did this every year. Even before I was born. The house was right on the beach. It was old and very large. I had spent every summer there with my grandparents from the time I was born.

This was the first year my Uncle Mike didn't come. My Uncle Mike came up every summer for two weeks. He was always so good to me. He was fun and kind, so tall and handsome. He always had time, patience and understanding for me.

He would hoist me up on his shoulders and bring me out to the deep water. We'd eat salt water taffy by the pound. We'd go down to Old Orchard and ride the merry-go-round. We'd build enormous sand castles.

At night, he'd read me stories, make me say my prayers, and tuck me into bed. Then he'd say, "You are the most beautiful girl in the world."

He'd kiss me on the end of my nose. "Just like the Eskimos do," he'd say.

Uncle Mike wasn't there that summer. Because it was 1968. Because Uncle Mike was 19. Because Uncle Mike was needed in Vietnam. Only no one understood that maybe I needed Uncle Mike too.

Big Buck and Aunt Marie were Uncle Mike's parents. They were there on the day that was supposed to be beautiful.

I showed them the letters Uncle Mike had sent me. I had seven. They were full of drawings of the trees in the jungle and the animals he had seen.

We had finished lunch. Big Buck and I went down to dig holes in the sand. We found a sand dollar. I put it in the red pail with Gumby on it that Uncle Mike had bought me the summer before.

Then we turned towards the house. That's when it happened.

A car pulled up. A dark green car. A plain car. A man got out. He had on sunglasses and a dark green uniform. He had something in his hand. That's when Buck started to run, yelling at me to stay away from the water.

I thought it was my Uncle Mike. I started running too. I could see the whole family on the porch. I was half way up the stairs when the man asked to talk to Buck. I realized the man wasn't my Uncle Mike. I was on the top step when I heard him say, "I am sorry to have to tell you that your son is missing in action, and presumed to be dead."

Everything stopped.

Everything.

All the colors.

All the relatives.

The sun.

The ocean. I couldn't even hear the ocean.

They thought I was on the beach. They thought I hadn't heard. They thought, they thought.

I ran, I ran down the stairs, to the beach. I ran and ran and ran.

Then I sat. I started to dig. When the hole was big enough, deep enough, I sat in it and started to cry.

I guess, from what they tell me, Buck found me and I was asleep. He picked me up and carried me home.

I was five years old when my Uncle Mike died. I was fifteen when my Uncle Mike, three bones in a casket, came home.

Teresa Brown

At The Wall, '84

Fifty-eight thousand standing tall....
Their voices speaking clearly from
that Black Granite Wall.
They told me that none of them died in vain
as the mourner's tears fell like a thundering rain.
The soldiers who remained showed immortal pride
as they saluted their nation and their brothers
who had died.
And it all finally falls into place....
The reason that any soldier of any war is willing
to suffer and die...
is because of an undying love...
...for you.

John McNiff
Combat Engineer
Vietnam 70-71

Lost Boys

We all really wanted to catch the wire, y'know. Well, some of us. Those of us who'd been there long enough. We still looked though. Half-hoping to catch the one we didn't see, half-hoping we didn't take anyone with us. We looked, with trained eyes, trying to survive so that if we missed one too many, well, we would become another 'Nam hero.

Basics was some picnic. Doing calisthenics in early mist on dewy pavement, bunkers kept clean and antiseptic for inspection, going on a weekend pass. The grass was mowed and flat, and off limits. But the war. Hell wasn't even a limit in our war. Mostly because we all saw it, we all trooped past it, over it and buried it. No limits then. We slept with one eye open and dried mud beneath the cuffs of our pants.

I would sometimes wake up glistening from rainfall in a gunner's trench, and as my muscles pulled my skin tense I'd realize I had leeches. I had to wait to burn them off, as the last thing I wanted to do was light up the night and be dropped by Charlie with a leech on my arm. Huh, what a way to go.

We spent long nights talking about, "when we get home" and what we'd do, what we'd be. Never who we'd become or how we'd live. Of course, we'd all live as heroes, every soldier who went to the war, whether he came back in a body bag or a wheelchair or not at all was a hero. Some came home in a straightjacket, didn't even know they were home. That didn't matter. We were sure we'd all be heroes and we had that to get us through.

Then, other, longer nights, we stayed in the dark together, silent and queasy. Sometimes crying. One of ours had caught a wire or slipped over the edge, or was lost somehow. God we were quiet. But God wasn't it. Respect for the dead wasn't it. We'd concentrate on our breathing, our heartbeat, digging the dirt from the tread of our boots, anything but our fear. Fear was it, and it was the same in all of us. Sometimes it was the dying, other times living. We had to have fear, but we had to move and shift and learn to stay on top of it. Because in the dark, when we were silent, we had no weapons, and we were alone.

We lost a lot, but what we lost isn't what keeps us awake one eye open, in a fourth-floor apartment with the window three feet away, open, at midnight. It's what we learned about ourselves.

Tammy Armstrong

Home At Last

In a drawer among the scarves and gloves a tattered
letter lies
All bent and worn from endless hours of leafing o'er
each page.
Buried 'neath the tear-stained lines a faded photo
hides
With face so proud and eager and of such a tender
age.
"Dear hon'," he said, "I'm tired and low and long
so much for home.
The scorching sun and jungle heat are more than I
can stand.
Around me and on every side those yellow bastards
roam,
Grenades or guns or blades concealed in every yellow
hand.
Just six more weeks and I can leave this lousy war
behind,
The stench of blood and sweat and guts and bodies
soaked with red.
Can't wait to taste your apple pie, to drink some
cherry wine,
To smell your perfume, kiss your lips, to sleep in
my own bed."
He left a man so young, ablaze with valor in his
heart,
Afire with eager dreams and filled with patriotic
pride.
He'd give the world his muscle, give his spirit, "do
his part,"
He'd give his all and more for those who had already
died.
How could he know the toll of endless months in jungles
deep?
Of constant vigilance, aware of Charlie's deadly
gaze;
Of being stalked and hunted and of nights afraid
to sleep;
Of watching buddies blown away and left to yesterdays...
and
He never dreamed of Napalmed streets and fiery orange
nights;
Of muscles torn and weary from some battle just been
fought;

Of missing limbs and shattered lives and blazing
rocket lights;
He never dreamed he'd "cellmate"
'longside corpses left to rot.
"So sorry to inform you, ma'am," the final letter
read,
And she slipped it 'neath the pillow where she gently
laid her head.
The crimson roses whither, tossed haphazard on his
bed;
He came home proud...
He came home free...
Alas!
He came home dead.

Gerry Dech

